

## **BRIEF FIRE HISTORY**

Fire has been a part of the natural world since the beginning of time. It has been instrumental in the development and condition of forests in Northern Idaho for millennia. Historically (prior to settlement) wildland fires in Northern Idaho were of mixed-severity with fire free intervals of about 30 to 100 years (Arno et al. 2000). Some of these fires were human caused, but most were the result of lightning. The shorter the interval between fires, the less severe the typical fire was likely to be. During normal weather patterns, fire would result in a mosaic of disturbance across the landscape. However, during drought conditions, the potential for stand replacing crown fires was great.

This historical pattern of fire occurrence and severity began to change with the arrival of European settlement. Human caused fires have impacted Northern Idaho for at least 6,000 years (Malouf 1969), but with the coming of settlement the number and frequency of human caused fires increased significantly. A number of large damaging fires occurred in the later part of the 1800s and early 1900s prompting the organization of wildland fire suppression efforts. In addition to suppressing human caused fires, naturally occurring lightning fires were also suppressed. These fire suppression efforts began to disrupt the historic behavior pattern of naturally occurring fires. As a result, contemporary fire interval and occurrence patterns are different from historic patterns. Today, we are faced with denser forest vegetation conditions over larger areas than would have occurred pre-settlement. Fires occurring today, during periods of high fire danger, will most likely burn with more intensity resulting in greater damage to the ecosystem and making suppression efforts more difficult.

Bonner County has not been immune to large wildfires. In 1910 three million acres of timberland burned in Montana, Washington and Northern Idaho. A large amount of timber burned in Bonner County during these fires.

Again in 1926, fires ravaged the northern part of the state with as many as 240 fires observed in the area now administered by the Priest Lake Ranger District.

Most memorable to long time residents of Bonner County are the fires of 1967. Three fires consumed 73,000 acres. One of those burns, the Sundance fire burned 50,000 acres in nine hours and threatened homes surrounding Bonners Ferry.

In October of 1991, high winds combined with dry conditions resulting in severe wildland interface fires in the Spokane and Coeur d'Alene areas. The fires were started by downed power lines and resulted in two deaths and over 100 homes damaged or destroyed. Several wildland fires occurred in Bonner County during the same period. The largest of these was the Kilroy Bay Fire that burned 2300 acres and was also caused by down power lines.

In 2000, millions of acres burned in Idaho and hundreds of homes burned in other states throughout the country. The 2000 fire season stands out from the others in one major aspect; it was the culmination of a decade in which an average of 940 homes per year were lost nationwide to wildfire (Source: Firewise). This triggered the adoption of the National Fire Plan and the accompanying ten year comprehensive strategy to address the impacts of wildfire on the landscape and communities.

In 2002 the Hope 44 fire burned 360 acres near the town of Hope. This human caused fire burned in rough steep terrain and heavy vegetation making suppression efforts difficult. Fortunately there were no homes in the direct path of the fire. If this fire had occurred one-half mile further east or west along state highway 200, life and property would have been directly threatened.

In September of 2003, the 3600 acre Myrtle Creek fire threatened to burn into the Kootenai Valley in Boundary County. The fire occurred at the end of an extended hot dry period and threatened several homes on the west side of Kootenai Valley. A change to a cool moist weather pattern helped prevent this fire from becoming much larger.

Extended dry weather, as was experienced in 2003, coupled with dense vegetation, were the major factors affecting fire behavior and the severity of damage in all of the examples presented above. Dense stands of vegetation burn with higher intensity, are more difficult to suppress, and result in fires with more severe impacts than would be expected from a typical fire under natural conditions.

Table 3 shows the cumulative number of fires, by cause, and acreage for the years 1981 through 2000. A table containing the number of fires by year, cause, and acreages can be found in Appendix B.

<b>Table 3</b> <b>Cumulative Number of Wildfires by Cause and Acreage for Bonner County</b> <b>1981-2000</b>			
	<b>Human Caused</b>	<b>Lightning Caused</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Number of Fires</b>	833	706	1539
<b>Number of Acres</b>	5441	4125	9566

Source: National Fire Plan Cohesive Team Northern Regional Division for North Idaho and Montana. 2000.

Fire agencies have developed effective fire fighting techniques for use in the wildland urban interface. But the techniques developed to engage a fire at the interface can only be used if it is safe for fire crews to be there. Dense vegetation can prevent fire crews from protecting homes and businesses from wildfire.